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SUBJECT: Second FAO/OIE Regional Meeting on Avian Influenza Control in Asia, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam: 23-25 February 2005

Summary

¶1. The Second FAO/OIE Regional Meeting on Avian Influenza Control in Asia was attended by 168 individuals including Chief Veterinary Officers of 28 countries and a delegation from Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, headed by Minister Cao Duc Phat. Leaders of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Organization for Animal Health and, the World Health Organization emphasized that, although Avian Influenza A, subtype H5N1 (AI), is an animal disease causing great economic and social impact on affected countries, the disease could lead to a new global human health crisis in the form of an influenza pandemic. Conference attendees agreed that one year after the beginning of the crisis, AI is endemic in many countries of Asia, circulating among poultry, ducks and wildlife in the region, and continues to pose a serious threat to human health and animals. Nevertheless, progress has been made in the understanding of the virus, its early detection and response to the disease and the role of vaccines in disease prevention. Over the past year experts have determined that transmission of the virus occurs primarily as a result of animal production methods and animal marketing behaviors in the region. Economic analyses on the impact of AI in the region suggested that these types of outbreaks are harder on the poor who rely on growing poultry as a means to make additional income as well as a necessary source of dietary protein. Conference recommendations to control virus spread and disease stressed the need to improve international coordination, national and regional veterinary services, diagnostic laboratory capacity, disease surveillance and epidemiology studies, and more transparent data sharing and called on developed and developing countries to contribute to these efforts. The conference presentations and the reports will be posted on the FAO website at <http://www.fao.org>.

Opening Remarks

¶2. The Second FAO/OIE Regional Meeting on Avian Influenza Control in Asia was attended by 168 individuals including Chief Veterinary Officers of 28 countries and a delegation from Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), headed by Minister Cao Duc Phat. The 3-day conference was jointly organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO). The regional leaders of each of these organizations and Minister Phat addressed the conference. All underscored the immediate challenges and necessity to lessen the impact of the virus in countries where it is endemic and to prevent its spread into unaffected countries. While H5N1 infection has caused considerable economic and social disruption for some economies, the potential social and economic effects of a human influenza pandemic would be devastating. Dr. Shigeru Omi, World Health Organization Regional Director for the Western Pacific urged all governments to work on a pandemic preparedness plan now; explaining that the last influenza epidemic was 40 years ago, that this resilient, versatile and highly pathogenic virus is firmly entrenched in Asia (infecting species, such as cats and tigers that were previously not thought to be susceptible to Influenza A viruses), and that the public implications of domestic ducks carrying and excreting large quantities of the virus without signs of illness were enormous. He stressed that the longer the virus circulated in animals, the greater the risk of human cases, and the higher the risk of a pandemic virus emerging through genetic changes in the virus.

¶3. Both Dr. T. Fujita, OIE Representative, Asia and the Pacific Region, and Dr. Samuel Jutzi, Director Animal Production and Health Division, FAO, Rome, emphasized the

need for international collaboration and partnerships to strengthen veterinary services in the region for more effective early detection and response systems, biosecurity and, ultimately, disease control. Both organizations are working together to strategically control trans-boundary animal diseases, globally and regionally under the FAO/OIE Global Framework for the Progressive Control of Transboundary Animal Diseases.

14. Minister Cao Duc Phat noted that Vietnam had experienced an unprecedented number of human deaths due to H5N1 infection. He described the measures Vietnam and MARD have taken since late 2003 when the H5N1 outbreaks were first acknowledged including the culling or death of 43.8 million poultry or 16.8% of the total poultry population in 2003/2004 and more than 1.5 million more as a result of the 2004/2005 outbreaks. Other activities include full and timely disclosure of outbreak situations, improving control of poultry movement and transportation and slaughtering practices, improving biosecurity, mobilizing government authorities at all levels and public organizations to participate in disease prevention and control, and monitoring disease in duck populations and restricting breeding and others. However, Vietnam still faces many challenges including the persistence of backyard and small-scale production facilities, limited veterinary skills in the country as a whole, and limited laboratory and diagnostic capabilities. He acknowledged assistance from international donors and multinational organizations and pledged Vietnam's willingness to share experiences and participate in activities of the international community to prevent and control AI.

Epidemiology of Avian Influenza A, Subtype H5N1

15. Dr. Roger Morris, Massey University EpiCenter, New Zealand, outlined the current epidemiology of Avian Influenza H5N1 in Asia. H5N1 viruses were first isolated in geese and domestic ducks in 1996 and have been circulating extensively in the region since then. There are no records of the virus in wild birds until 2002. The spread throughout the region since the first identification of H5N1 in diseased geese in 1996 may be due to a number of factors such as cross infection at live poultry markets, movement of infected birds, inadvertent transport of the virus on equipment and infection of migratory birds by domestic ducks and geese. Migratory birds are not thought to be the main source of viral transmission. Dr. Morris notes that the epidemic is best understood as a "reservoir-spillover-aberrant host relationship" -- that is, domestic ducks, geese and quails are the reservoir, which infected wild waterfowl and then domestic poultry, spilling over to a number of mammalian species, including man as an aberrant host becoming diseased but not involved in transmission (yet). Dr. Ian Brown OIE/FAO Reference Laboratory for AI, VLA-Weybridge UK, provided further evidence noting that since first recognized, the H5N1 virus has mutated numerous times; these changes are reflected in changes in the pathology of the disease in the host and spreading to other unlikely hosts.

16. Recent analyses from Thailand showed significant correlation between free grazing duck distribution and the distribution of outbreaks of AI in domestic poultry. Analyses of Vietnam's poultry outbreaks appear to show similar patterns, clustering primarily in the Red River Valley, near Hanoi in the north of Vietnam and in the Mekong River Delta region in the south of Vietnam where the density of both poultry, water fowl and humans are high. Dr. Nguyen Tien Dung, Chief, Virology Department, National Institute for Veterinary Research (NIVR), identified through sero-surveillance studies risk factors contributing to both the first (2003/2004) and second (2005/2006) AI outbreaks in Vietnam. Risk factors include: high chicken and duck density, bird movement (marketing, offal disposal, and disposal of infected birds), poultry management practices (backyard flocks, raising/housing of multiple bird species in a single location, and little or no biosecurity), surveillance (incomplete) and detection (delayed and/or disease misdiagnosis), and inadequate compensation and public awareness.

17. In humans, both Drs. Oshitani and Horby from WHO confirmed that currently there is no efficient human-to-human transmission of H5N1 AI. However, human cases correlate geographically with outbreaks in poultry. Recommendations to reduce the risk of human infections were to identify the at-risk populations through better surveillance and well-conducted epidemiologic studies, eliminate the source of human infection and establish appropriate interventions at the animal and human interface through greater public awareness, use of personal protective equipment for health care workers and farmers, the use of antivirals, and the development and use of influenza vaccines. At the time of the conference, 44 AI

cases and 32 deaths from AI had been confirmed in humans in Vietnam. [Note: On February 20, 2005, Vietnam announced the 33rd confirmed human death. End note]. Dr. Horby contended that the number of known cases was most likely an underestimate of the infected population. [Note: On February 19, 2005, Nature published a report, based on a study from Japan, alleging that the sensitivity of the diagnostic tests used by Vietnam's laboratories was too low to identify all cases. Scientists from Vietnam noted that the laboratories would begin using the more sensitive diagnostic test and training the technicians better. This information was not reported at the conference. End Note]

Intervention and Control Strategies

¶ 18. Prevention and control of H5N1 AI infection requires a multi-tiered, multi-faceted strategic approach, which is culturally, socially, and economically sensitive, and reasonably priced and low-tech enough to be applied effectively over a wide range of farm situations. Experts stressed key strategies to be implemented including improving veterinary services, laboratory diagnostic capacity, surveillance and detection, animal husbandry management including application of enhanced biosecurity methods, strategic use of vaccines, possible restructuring of the poultry industry and greater emphasis on public awareness and farmer training on AI management and control. Depending upon the country situation and outbreak status, implementation of all or some of these activities may be necessary.

Vaccines

¶ 19. A number of presentations addressed the pros and cons of vaccine use as a tool to help control H5N1 AI. Clearly, depending upon the phase of an outbreak or infection, a mixed control approach is generally recommended. Depending upon the country, vaccination intervention may be considered. In general, vaccination against H5N1 AI, protects birds against developing the clinical signs of the disease and death, helps to reduce viral shedding if the bird is infected, prevents bird to bird, and, hopefully, bird to human contact transmission. As a food safety issue, vaccination prevents H5N1 AI in poultry meat. However, the widespread use of vaccinations is controversial from a number of perspectives including the overall cost particularly to small backyard farmers, limited effectiveness in ducks, the inability to discriminate between infected birds or vaccinated birds (a concern of importing countries) and the development of a sense of complacency among farmers and the public that the problem will go away without making the necessary infrastructure and biosecurity changes.

Food Safety

¶ 10. Of concern to both poultry producers and consumers is the issue of food safety. Dr. David Swayne, Southeast Poultry Research Laboratory, USDA/ARS, presented a number of studies examining the ability to infect meat by giving birds AI infected feed and viral load in the body of H5N1 AI infected birds. He approached food safety from the perspective of worker safety issues and consumer protection. Workers or individuals who slaughter poultry or fowl (chicken, ducks, geese, quail) infected with Avian Influenza H5N1 maybe at risk from exposure through inhalation or mucosal membrane contact with virus particles which may be in the bird's respiratory and digestive tracts, in the blood, meat or bones, or as contaminants on feathers. This possibility necessitates the use of appropriate personal protective equipment when slaughtering poultry and fowl.

¶ 11. Consumers not involved in slaughtering should be made aware that the blood, meat or bones of H5N1 infected poultry and fowl may contain the virus. Cooking to 70 degrees C will kill H5N1 virus. Additionally, H5N1 AI virus may contaminate eggs, particularly if laid shortly before death. Pasteurization and cooking thoroughly will inactivate the virus. In summary, infected birds, (sick, dying or potentially infected) should not be processed for consumption. Proper vaccination can prevent H5N1 virus from invading poultry meat.

Economic Impact

¶ 12. Evaluation of the economic impact of the H5N1 AI outbreak is complex. All economies of Southeast Asia with H5N1 AI outbreaks experienced GDP reductions, not only from loss of poultry stocks and human illnesses, but also from the costs necessary to respond to the outbreaks. Experts

noted that the impact of the outbreaks varies along the market chain, e.g., industrial production system versus backyard scavenging system. Socioeconomic surveys of countries in Southeast Asia document that the resulting effects of H5N1 AI outbreaks take the heaviest toll on the poorest families. Loss of birds, restriction of bird movements and sale, lowered prices, loss of substantial proportion of annual income coupled by the lack of compensation, all impact the livelihood of subsistence farmers. Additionally, concomitant increases in the price of other sources of protein, put those at the bottom of the economic ladder at greater risk of nutritional deficiencies. Medium- to large-scale producers also experience financial loss primarily due to lack of adequate compensation, and in Vietnam, the need to obtain loans to finance culling, disposal, restocking, and perhaps, changes in animal husbandry practices. However, these producers may be able to shift production to other types of commodities, such as pigs or rice.

Conference Conclusions

¶13. Conference delegates concluded that to reduce the risk of a global human pandemic of H5N1 AI, a concerted effort to control the spread, and if possible, eliminate the virus from the region is necessary. Such goals will require concerted efforts and collaboration on the part of international organizations, governments and others. Representatives of FAO and OIE project that more than 100 million USD is needed in direct financial support as well as in-kind assistance to make the improvements recommended by the body. They noted that less than 18 million USD was donated in the past year towards mitigating this problem. While these donations have contributed to improvements in the veterinary systems of countries in the region, it falls short of the true need. Final conference recommendations will be posted on the FAO website at <http://www.fao.org>.

MARINE